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ABSTRACT

Women in prison have needs for career education, although it is often difficult to provide with scarce resources. Teachers of female prisoners saw a need for resources, experiences, and coping skills when asked for a response to female inmates' career education needs. Experiences were the most difficult to manage for teachers in prison schools, since outsiders are reluctant to come into a prison for a typical job fair. Female inmates indicated that they would have no trouble getting jobs, although most expected to get minimum-wage service jobs. One of the most useful sets of career education materials for teachers of women inmates is the Atkins Life Skills Series (1975). This set of materials is a complete classroom approach. Student workbooks, simulation videos, recorded interviews on audiocassettes, and, a 10-lesson format stored in 10 boxes make it a comprehensive, portable career education curriculum. Designed for the underemployed adult and extremely sex fair, the program provides opportunities for self-assessment, job exploration, and skills in job seeking. Using this system, along with more emphasis on personal counseling, could enhance the career education and job possibilities of female prison inmates. (KC)

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Quest for a Career: The Female Inmate

Learner Opportunities, Resources and Recommendations

for

Vocational Education 567

Sam Houston State University

Dr. Ray Agan

Summer, 1989

"It is precisely at those stressful moments in history, when everything seems to be changing, that we worry about women's proper place." (Jones, 1980, p. 349).

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Quest for a Career: The Female Inmate

It is not the intent of this writer to add to the existing body of knowledge concerning the inmate as a non-functioning member of society. Rather, the female inmate as learner and job seeker will be examined in an informal fashion based on many years' exposure to the different mind set of mature adult women incarcerated on felony convictions in one of the nation's larger prison systems.

Interviews with women prisoners, their teachers, and an examination of some specialized career education materials in light of major career development concepts form the bulk of this paper. Finally, the writer presents, with some reservations, recommendations for a suitable educational and organizational approach to career counseling by the prison's established school district.

Female Inmate Learner

Granted that much of the literature focuses on the male offender, the female becomes, then, the minority of minorities. Even experienced prison educators in this system fall into the easy trap of expecting all felons to be alike--an approach that is not trustworthy. The opposite position that the female offender is totally unique, on the other hand, cannot be easily proved. Some workers say that media hype is responsible (Jones, 1980) and if opposite sex members of prison classrooms ask if "Chained Heat"

and "Women Behind Bars", two current movies, are true depictions of female inmates, there must be some truth to Jones' theory. This writer believes, from many years' observation, women inmates are not children. Certainly physical age, from 16 to 69, has provided some variety in what one expects an inmate to be.

It is a mistake, further, to assume these women are as they are referred to "children, 3 to 5 years old". This writer believes with other teachers that the maturity level is referred to here, not age or ability.

Many of these women are wage earners, capable of holding jobs of some responsibility and certainly most are parents of two or more children, if that is a marker of maturity or ability. The overall impression the teacher gets; however, is one that indicates many are women in the "never worked" category. It would be pleasant to assume that these were "displaced housewives" who had been supported by a husband, re-running the model of what Americans think their family models are. It is shocking to learn that these women are often "mules"--dope carriers, working across borders, and across town; hot check writers in nine figures, working many towns; and cookers of methamphetamines working, because of the odor produced, way out of town.

Women primarily have stress crime convictions. They are check writers, robbery felons, and drug handlers--all seemingly non-violent crimes. This female difference appears when teachers discuss their students' verbal approaches to problem solving. Women talk--sometimes very loudly, rarely very violently--someone or something to death. Their approach to problem solving is different. One salient characteristic is "loud talking". This is

yelling, screaming, and in general filling the air with (often obscene) words at an attempt at self-defense, a characteristic so accepted that the term "loud talking" not only defines this behavior but is used as a reference in rule violations within the prison. Women, then, are verbally violent.

More respected observers speak of the "profoundly amoral" nature and their inability to look beyond the impulse of the moment, the moral imbecile psychologists know so well. Teachers agree with experts that inmates, criminals, are concrete thinkers, with short attentions spans, who find it impossible to take a long range view of their lives and rarely learn from experience (Morin, 1981). They view straight life as "concrete acts, most of them boring". They, then, do not see the value of long term rewards of a family or career, and are victims of intense fear.

This fear is maintained by exerting control over others, intimidation, manipulation--"lies and cons". It is in this arena that the teacher/counselor meets the inmate in an effort to teach them trades that are acceptable to society and to counsel them into a job and straight life. Isaacson refers to these women when he identifies the early leaver, the late enterer, the economically disadvantaged and, in general, those of special needs (Feldman, 1978).

Teacher Interviews

Three teachers were orally interviewed by the writer. They were asked what they did in their classrooms to promote career education, what their "philosophy" of career education was and if they could recognize any student needs in relationship to jobs and training. As expected, these held strong opinions about how the

inmate learner should be presented with career information. These opinions were biased by the realities both of the teaching situations involved and the nature of the students these teachers had met. Their responses and biases are reported in summary following.

It could not be said that these teachers saw career education as one of their major goals. The universal lament, perhaps that of all teachers, but particular to this setting, is that there is never enough time to teach the necessary concepts and skills. Those skills generally were either social or job related, if they could be divided into two easy categories. Teachers felt students needed to learn preparatory job skills such as using want ads, preparing resumes, and practicing for job interviews. The other skill group was more coping such as how to dress or deal with anger.

Teachers also felt students needed information on grooming, dressing appropriately, proper telephone procedures and related job seeking skills. Some saw the necessity for job selection information and used curricular approaches to giving students information about jobs in general. Commercial materials like the one reviewed here are the most commonly used. Teachers' own experiences and skills and a good deal of job/work advice supplement these materials (Interview, 1989). Vocational attainment is a high priority goal of the prison school.

Most appropriately to this setting, teachers identify some special needs that must be met in instruction to inmates. These are attitudinal, the interviewed teachers have a counseling bias. Filling the lack of access to real world situations, teachers

think students should have access to typical employers to ask real world questions. The most likely is: Would you hire an ex-offender?

Teachers also see a need for some sort of reality testing for inmates. For example, they think that their students must face the fact that without further training, job opportunities for the former felon are limited. Students must deal with the reality that, unless they are willing to change a great deal, their futures are bound by the frustration of minimum wage jobs. The "high dollar" jobs that correspond to drug dealers' earnings are not available to those who have few marketable skills and/or little formal schooling. The attitude that causes the unskilled worker to spontaneously quit when asked to do a low level task, like mopping the restroom, is the one teachers want students to overcome. Work is not a part of inmates' self-concept. They felt working for eight hours at minimum wage was not a state inmates, not surprisingly, enjoyed. Students have no idea that a job is a part of themselves and their lives, these teachers agreed.

When asked for an appropriate response to inmates' career education needs, teachers identified resources, experiences and coping skills. Recourses included classroom teaching materials as well as speakers, interviewers, and business representatives, preferably former felons that had "made it", and research or reference books and audio/visual materials. All were seen as important to bring the real world of work to inmates, since they were unable to visit job sites.

Experiences were the most difficult to manage for teachers in

prison schools. Outsiders are reluctant to come into a prison for a typical job fair atmosphere. Outside speakers, guided study, role playing, and problem solving of real on-the-job problems are artificial means that teachers would use to bring the real world to the prison classroom. Needless to say, inmates feel that only what exists outside the wire fences is real, not even simulators inside the walls can be trusted (Interview, 1989). Teachers, then, work at a disadvantage, no matter how dedicated or creative they might be, no matter what materials are available to them.

Coping skills are the broadest of the categories teachers identified as needed by inmates. Knowing where to go for help, which agencies to use and how to use them, were two practical skills teachers suggested. Personal skills like budgeting and specialized work skills, for example, were also identified as important. Dealing with anger and on-the-job frustrations were the coping skills listed by teachers as necessary for inmates to know before leaving prison.

An important issue was the decision that the inmate makes about answering the Have-you-ever-been-convicted-of-a-felony? question. It is a difficult task for teachers to convince inmates that telling the truth is possible and that lying or "forgetting" to answer can cost them the job later. Teacher recognition of these three areas of need may indicate that most educational materials do not adequately cover their concerns or that such materials have not yet been discovered for classroom use. No teacher mentioned the counselor as a resource at this unit.

Inmate Interviews

Three female inmates were interviewed by the writer

concerning their career plans. Informally they were asked to detail their work plans following release. In addition, they were asked how they reached this point in their career (or where they were in the decision making process). As if it were advice to others, they were asked what they thought was important to know about getting and keeping a job, and finally, they were asked what they specifically needed to know now about jobs and work as they faced re-entering the job market.

The first L. was an over-30 female within one year of release. She was anticipating returning to a job she had secured through a family member in electronics assembly. She had been through the Job Corps program in another state and had liked it there. She said it was like camp, it was "live", meaning an active way to live and learn. Although she had learned basic office procedures--courses in shorthand, typing, and accounting--in Job Corps, her job assignment on this unit was maintenance and her specialty was plumbing and air conditioning. She was planning to drop GED class to work full time for the balance of her stay at the women's unit. A confident learner, she felt she could handle any job situation, "I'll teach myself," she said, "One way or another, I'll get it." (Interview, 1989).

Sh. is under thirty, and a classmate of the previously interviewed worker, who also faces another year of imprisonment. Not nearly so confident, she wanted to try modeling, being a dental assistant, a photographer or possibly enlist in the Navy. She had come to these choices from friends, or had seen these jobs in the free world. She was especially impressed by models on television. She thought jobs were easy to get and had worked as a

waitress and bartender and in factories, she said. The best help she had received in prison was a course in Vocational Industrial Cleaning. She saw this work as far more specialized than jobs she had held previously outside the prison. She felt she could use this training and information in getting a job once she was released and knew that within a year she could own her own business as a contractor for house cleaning and new construction make-ready.

When asked what she needed to know before entering the job market, she agreed she did not know, and, when pressed, that she had not made a choice yet. For others, however, she did have some advice. She thought one had to know themselves first, find out what they wanted financially, study to make a choice and find out what it takes to get into each field. Interestingly, she knew what her anticipated outcome would be, she predicted that in ten years she would own her own home and <u>two</u>, she emphasized, two cars. She mentioned, in passing, that her time was well spent in the two vocational courses she had completed in prison.

K. is over thirty years old, had dropped out of high school, is finishing her GED in prison, and planning to leave within 45 days. She had been a cook (at Denny's) in the free world and had received extensive on-the-job training and was returning to that work on release. She thought the best things she had learned were specific job seeking skills. She was impressed with a teacher that taught her to respond to job interview questions in the way that an employer <u>wanted</u> them answered. This seemed to be privileged information that she valued--a job getting trick. Her advice to others was to be honest about their previous record,

admit to having been in jail because, she felt, sooner or later the employer would find out. Although more fatalistic than the others, this woman felt the right answers were important.

All three interviewees did agree on two points, perhaps because they thought the interviewer wanted to hear them as well, or because they were in the process of cleaning up their drop out mess. The three thought high school was an important job qualification, one all three lacked, and that "dropping out" was a mistake.

Completing high school, in every case, would have helped them in the job market. All three also reported no problems with unemployment, that they found jobs easily, quickly, and to their satisfaction. Further, these three reported to be strangers to the typical welfare dole, none had received or sought any public assistance.

A more general indicator of attitudes of the female offender can be easily discerned from the results of a survey of a class of twenty. When asked to state their job preferences, most stated service occupations, and understood that they would work for minimum wage. Most of the twenty were unskilled or if they had received training, it had been a result of employment. Over half of those polled had some identifiable job skills. Three-quarters had never worked. This is confusing unless their definition of work is understood. Work done in the prison, for example, is not work since no money exchanges are made. The typical inmate response to prison work is since the worker does not receive a check, it is, therefore, <u>not</u> work. It is not difficult to imagine, then, that eight of the twenty neither wanted or needed

further training. As this was a class working on GED training, eighteen expressed an interest in college.

The final question for them was hypothetical. Which would you prefer, (a) make $500 for two hour's work tonight (no task specified), or (b) work two weeks and be paid $500--at the end of two weeks? Their choice was obvious, the former, of course, quick and easy. There is nothing better.

Instructional Materials Identified

It is the task of the teacher to locate useful materials for instruction and resources for references once the needs of learners have been identified. The teacher has an "over the rainbow" optimism that somewhere perfect materials exist. This writer's opinion is that if such do exist, they are the Atkins Life Skills Series (Atkins, 1975). Although well established, these items are a complete classroom approach. Student workbooks, simulation videos, recorded interviews on audio cassettes, and a ten lesson format stored into as many manageable boxes make it a nearly perfect, portable career education curriculum.

Designed for the under-employed adult and, suitable to the time of its development, extremely sexually fair, the program provides opportunities for self-assessment, job exploration, and skills in job seeking (want ads, telephone use and business letters). Employment agencies, personal contacts, goal setting and evaluation are explored and experienced by the learner in the class setting. Job choice is defined and vocational goals are set through the use of discussion, audio (reading experiences) and written information with structured forms to be filled out.

It is the strength of this program that it teaches job skills

while it teaches about jobs and promotes job choice. The final three sections are cumulative, one is interviews, another applications, and the last handling difficult on-the-job situations stressing problem solving and good work habits. A quick scan of an abbreviated table of contents shows that the items cover the full career development scheme.

Table 1

Atkins Life Skills: Employability Series

Chapter	A Brief Table of Contents
1	Who I Am and Where I Want to Go
	My Interests and Abilities, My Job As I See It
	Who I Am Presentation
2	Ten Occupational Fields: How Do I Explore Them?
	Ten Possible Fields: Jobs in Ten Fields
3	Jobs and Training: Beginning the Search
	Using Want Ads, Telephone Calls, Business Letters
4	Employment Agencies and Personal Contacts
	The Private and Public Agency: Approaching A Contact
5	Choosing A Good Job for Myself
	Vocational Exploration, Resources, Job Profiles
6	Planning for Personal Goals
	Planning Goals: Time and Schedules
7	Developing a Vocational Plan
	Vocation Goals, Taking Steps to Reach Your Goal
8	Looking Good on Paper
	Tips for Filling Out Applications

Handling Troublesome Questions

9 The Job Interview: How to be Effective

Suggestions, Hints, Typical Questions,

More Troublesome Questions

10 Keeping My Job: Habits That Help

Unwritten Employment Agreement

Common Problems at Work

Absenteeism - 3 Viewpoints

Source: Institute for Life Coping Skills (1975). Columbia University, New York.

Fully field tested, and with available training for the teacher, this series allows the student, the long-term unemployed, to cover the whole range of possibilities in relationship to self-identified skills, abilities, and needs. Not always used in the number sequence provided here, each unit stands alone, and builds on previous learning experiences.

This teacher used a job exploration test as an introduction, and the Dictionary of Occupational Titles as a supplement to these ten books. Many students' needs, questions and fears are satisfied by these materials. For example, many women feel that saying they have never been convicted of a felony will increase their job chances. "Handling Troublesome Questions", an audio tape that "reads" for the student, addresses this issue directly. After some class discussion and exploring expanded choices, the student is free to choose from more appropriate answers than simply yes or no.

These materials provide a variety of learner experiences.

The most loathsome for inmates is the paper and pencil work; but role playing, simulation, and a games approach to practice make it informal and nearly pleasant. Video taping the final interview, after much preparation and practice, makes closing a useful experience for inmates as well. The awarding of a certificate makes the weeks of work seem justified; many inmates have never completed job tasks and few have certificates to prove it.

The most difficult part of teaching these materials is establishing a classroom atmosphere of give and take. There is a great need on the part of prison learner females to take over and "run" the entire process--that is, to talk constantly and loudly and, if at all possible, impede the continuance of the task. The Life Skills Educator (teacher) must then be skilled not only in the materials, but in handling group processes. Fortunately, this is a manageable technique easily mastered.

At its best, this process and these materials seem to bridge the gap in the prison classroom. The teacher moves among both roles, teacher and counselor, and either assumes the responsibility for the lack of the traditional counselor in place at prisons or supplements work done by any existing counselor. At worst there are dull, rigorous exercises that confirms the square nature of work to the inmate learner. With the nature of the learner, the prison teachers' opinions, and an exploration of some useful materials, the writer ventures some recommendations for the prison education system.

Zunber identifies short-term goals for disadvantaged learners; finding appropriate role models, and increased feelings of self-directedness as counseling activities suitable to this

group of prior offenders (Isaacson, 1986, p. 443). With some help from Isaacson, the roles of the counselor, teacher and the system will be addressed by brief suggestions for improvement in the career development process for the female inmate learner.

Because of the chasm, even if it is only in the minds of inmates, between the free world and the prison learning setting, the most appropriate way to join the two would be a career conference/education day to benefit those in the educational/ vocational business. A university style (massed tables in the gym) convocation with representatives from colleges, training schools and business/employers would give students direct access, unavailable even in their home setting, to living resources. It would wreak havoc on security, but would provide the face-to-face contact often needed in the decision process, as well as a test of reality for inmates. The conference nature could target interested students to discuss a specific field or seek answers to prepared questions. Matched with representatives of educational institutions, training and learning concerns can be addressed as well. Among teachers, administrators and security personnel, the planning can provide ample opportunity for the outside to get to know the inside as well.

The educational system in prison should also provide responsive career and personal counseling as a daily product available on request to inmates. The role of the counselor as it exists and is observable to this writer is not that of helper, guide, or listener; but that of administrative assistant. To accomplish this role clarification, and present such learning products as a career day, there must be a knowledgeable acceptance

of the differences of job requirements on each unit as well as a goal free evaluation of what administrative counselors actually do time-wise.

Further, career centers must be available on each unit, particularly on the female units, where there is limited access, stress, and information on career goals. Isaacson (p. 231) clearly stipulates how such a center can be established and this class has explored the establishment of a study committee for career centers.

With a central information source, it follows that the role of the school counselor can be strengthened in the prison setting. Finally it is desirable that the counselors take a more assertive stance with teachers (Isaacson, 1986, p. 317). Serving as liaison, providing materials, personal counseling, and improving teacher communication are desirable goals for the school counselor in the prison setting.

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